

Not Dark Yet...

By Peter Stone Brown

On Sunday I bought what will be my final purchase at Tower Records. I was riding my bike by their downtown Philly store, and even though I knew the pickings would be slim, the 70% percent off along with the five days to go sign, were impossible to ignore. When I went in, the second floor of the massive store was closed up, and what was left didn't even fill the remaining browsers. If there was a classical CD in sight, I didn't see it.

The three-month liquidation of Tower Records was a sad and pitiful wake in which I participated every few weeks. Only in Sunday's purchase, where I bought three CDs for less than 15 bucks, was there any kind of real deal. The rest was a natural ritual—combined with the knowledge that I might not see certain albums again—and now was the time to get them.

Records have been a large part of my life. There was a time when if I passed a record store, it was impossible not to go in (which would drive whoever I was with crazy). Years later, working as a courier where everyday I stood a chance of being sent anywhere within a 300-mile radius, I was always on the lookout for two things—record stores and diners. In a musty ancient store in Trenton, I came across the very first T-Bone Burnett album, recorded under the name of J. Henry Burnett.

I started hanging out in record stores in junior high school. There were two in my town in North Jersey, although one was really an appliance store with a record section in the back. The guy who ran the record department would let me go back in the stock room and rummage through the promotional items. It was a good way to get posters for free, and I came out of it with a Bob Dylan album cover that was never released.

Years later, I ended up working in a few. The first was Sam Goody's downtown Philadelphia store. Sam Goody (now also defunct) was Tower's predecessor on the East Coast, and even when they only had a few stores, they called themselves "The world's largest record retailer." Going to Sam Goody's was a magical experience. The store was huge. Aisles and aisles of records. I remember going to Goody's West Side store with my brother. We were on our way to see Bob Dylan's Halloween concert, and record buying was serious business. We laid about 20 records we wanted on top of the browsers and narrowed them down to two.

Working in a record store was never as much fun as it should have been, although Sam Goody's was a great source of comedy. A full catalogue store, they carried just about every label except Rounder Records, for some reason never explained. Working at Goody's for six months was equivalent to a year anywhere else, if not more, because you had to deal with every conceivable recording including albums of sound effects, bird calls, language instruction records and Mummers albums. The Mummers are a Philadelphia institution. They march up Broad Street every New Year's Day playing "Oh Dem Golden Slippers," dressed in costumes usually made of feathers they spend the entire year making. The Mummers were on the Sure label. Goody's carried the entire line, except Sure #35 (which never came in, no matter how many times it was ordered). Of course, Sure #35 was the one record that somebody wanted and one salesperson made the mistake of telling a customer he could get it. Every Saturday, the man would come in looking for the record. And every week, he was told it was on order. This went on for close to a year. Then the customer learned the salesman's name, and on Saturdays all the guys in the record department worked with an eye on the front door so they could warn the salesman to go hide if this guy came in.

In those days, Philly had several record stores. For whatever reason, all the good ones were close to each other on the East side of downtown. Wednesdays was shopping night, which meant a ten-hour work day. No one had Wednesday off, and no one had Saturday off. The idea was to go on dinner break as late as possible so you could come back usually slightly drunk and do as little as possible.

I was hired because I knew where to put Procol Harum albums. Goody's had just moved from their original location, bought out from under them by their main competitor who happened to be Sam Goody's former son-in-law. The result was a siege mentality, with Goody's going to the mattresses until, in one rather amazing Michael Corleone-esque move, they bought out the competitor. This more than doubled the amount of stores they owned, which in some cases meant having two stores in the same mall.

That acquisition was the beginning of the end for Sam Goody. I was manager of the record department by then and was moved to one of the new mall stores. I walked out not long after. The only thing that made working there tolerable was being in the city. The way to deal with it was pretending you were working all week for the big show on Saturday. And Saturday was a show because every freak in the city would come in one long parade. We all had our own special customers we'd wait for. If we didn't like someone or were in a conversation with

someone we worked with or in the middle of a cigarette, our usual response was, "It's over there."

The special customers were the ones you could talk serious music with and turn onto the good stuff. One of my first customers was a kid into blues harmonica. I pointed him toward Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, II, Junior Wells and James Cotton. He got into it in a big way, and every time he'd come in, he'd tell me about obscure blues 45's he'd found. Steve Guyger went on to become a great blues harp player who worked with Muddy Waters, Jimmy Rogers and (much later) Levon Helm.

Sometime in the early 1980s, the first East Coast Tower Records opened on Lower Broadway in New York City. By then, Sam Goody's was in existence in name only, and anyone who knew about records considered it a joke. I happened to be in New York the second day they were open, and the amount of stock they had, in addition to the way the store was laid out, was amazing. There were no miscellaneous sections, and every artist had a browser card. Musical categories were kept together, you could go from folk music to bluegrass to country all in a row, and they had records I didn't even think were in print any more. And since it was their grand New York City opening, everything was on sale.

A few years later, Tower opened in Philly on South Street on the site of a failed music club. I knew a lot of people who went down for jobs, most with several years of experience. Tower didn't care how experienced you were, as the starting pay—slightly above minimum wage—was the same no matter what experience you had. By then I was pretty much done working in record stores, having been alienated by Philly's number one independent store at the time (which is a whole other story). Some people I know refused to work there because the pay was so bad, but a lot of others—usually musicians—did. When they opened in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, almost the entire staff of a smaller chain saw the writing on the wall and moved over to Tower immediately.

A couple of years after Tower's emergence in the Philadelphia area, the great conversion to CDs began and with that the price of buying music rose considerably. Tower may have been the biggest music retailer, but their prices sucked and their sales seemed non-existent or relegated to the stuff that was cheaper already. The great myth of Tower Records was their catalogue. On initial appearance, it looked like they had everything. But start digging slightly deeper, and they didn't. How their inventory worked was a mystery, and as time got on, the way albums were categorized could be bizarre. And once an

album received a computer code, that was it, it couldn't be changed. There were many times I'd see something I wanted or that looked interesting but didn't have the money at the time to buy it. When I went back to get it, it was gone. And just like Sure #35, it never returned.

Tower has been on the verge of bankruptcy for years. I have several friends who worked there over the years and one who has stayed to the bitter end. He'd clue me in to each bankruptcy long before it was announced publicly. I knew inherently that the end was near this summer when I went into their South Street store and they didn't ask to check my backpack.

Where I once could name a dozen record stores in Philly without even thinking about it, today the number has greatly diminished. Most people buy their music online now but it's just not the same looking at a list of albums at an online store. Even though they may offer robotic suggestions based on what you're looking at, there's not that one knowledgeable person to say "those are the later Little Richard or George Jones recordings, you want the earlier ones."

For those of us who like rummaging through music stores for the pure thrill of discovery and holding something in our hands before deciding whether or not to buy it and who consider both collecting and listening to music a shared experience, Tower Record's bittersweet fall is one more sign that the end is near. It's not dark yet, but it's getting there.